

THE SUPREME GIFT

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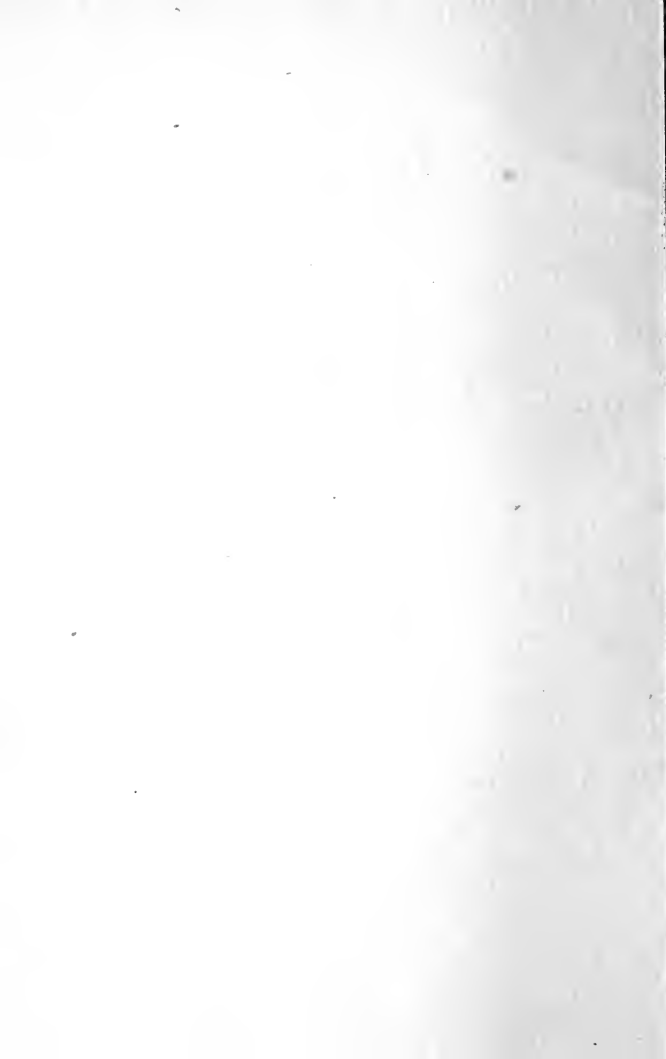
ARLO BATES

*Delivered at the annual meeting of the PHI
BETA KAPPA of TUFTS COLLEGE May
10, 1911, and now privately printed to
serve as a Christmas Greeting to friends.*

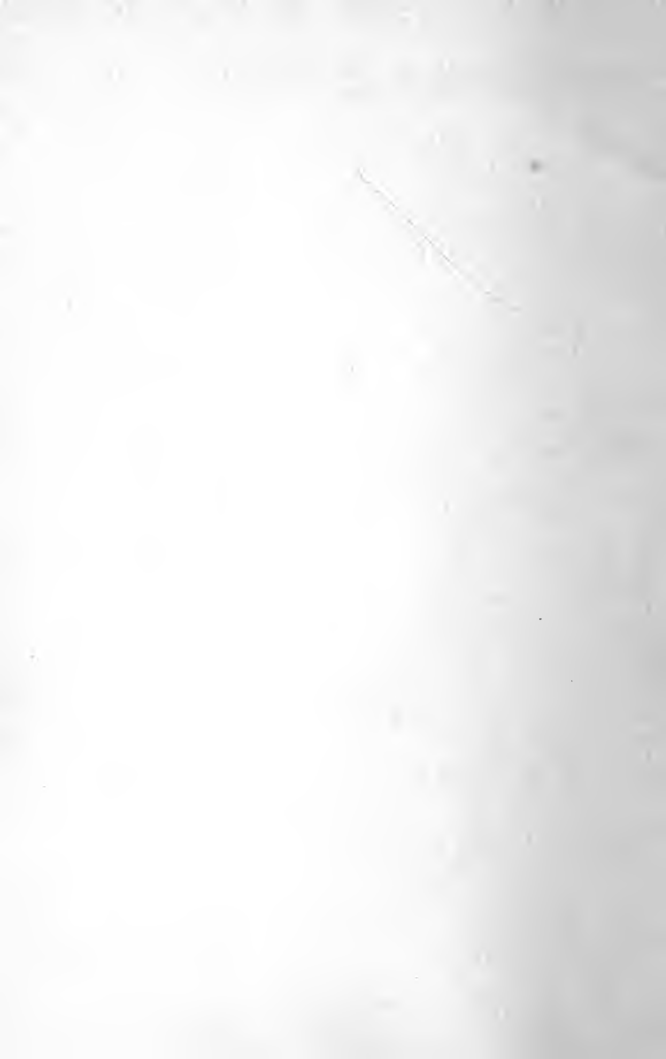


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The Supreme Gift

I

GIFT-BEARING cometh bounteous Life.
She brings
To childhood dear, unreasoning days,
 Cadenced of angels' wings
 Adown their sweet amaze,
 When but to be is joy;
To youth the prodigal she lavish flings
Rich treasure for his wasting or employ;
Then to the man gives power, glory, gold;
Conquest and kingship with their pomp and pride;
Or nobler gifts: hopes that through all abide,
 Home's blessings manifold;
Beauty and love, those jewels twain
Of which the very gods are fain;
The thrill of fatherhood, which takes man's breath
For very awe, as if he had slain death;
Or sorrow's sacramental cup, whose wine
Is token of man's heritage divine.
Unweariedly Life still bestows,
Ungrudgingly her bounty flows:

Till oft man asks, were his the choosing,
Were his the taking or refusing
From all her gifts of weal or pain,
In which he wins best good or gain.

II

WHAT is the highest bounty Life bestows,
Best of all gifts man's earthly being knows?
Not joy, though all dead laughter woke
To echo mirthfulness divine,
With zest of youth and song and vine,
The soul of pleasure to invoke:
Like sparkle on a wave joy dances,
While swift the swallowing gloom advances.
Nor best of all is wealth, or power,
Or fame's flame-blinding hour;
For who with Midas-touch, or might whose stroke
Hath humbled all mankind to bear his yoke,
Or who that hears honor's acclaim
Make earth reecho with his name,
Shall this earth's richest treasure deem;
Who for this barter all
Of good that might befall,
And count it of Life's gifts the gift supreme?

III

NOR yet is beauty best that Life concedes.

Not beauty, though the evening star
Through dusk of violet heavens glancing
Broods on its pictured shape entrancing
Where purple-black among its reeds

The pond lies smooth and far.

Not beauty, though the quickened marble keep
Down dulling centuries the thrill it caught
When some Hellenic hand enraptured wrought
With godlike touch a god, and woke from sleep

The stone's imprisoned loveliness;

Not beauty, though our sense knew the caress
Of all lost fairness of dead summer days,
Of all hushed melody of bygone lays,
All wonder of those women fair of old
Who for the world itself their favor sold.

None of all these an answering pulse may waken
When anguish numbs, or death with fingers cold
Dear love has taken.

Sorrow may bring the pride of beauty low;
Life's noblest gift fails not in hours of woe.

IV

AND love, enkindling love, which bards have sung
Till down the ages swells the song,—

Though neither lute, nor string, nor tongue,
But does love's worth most grievous wrong;
For love alone when Paradise was lost
Could man live on, enduring all life cost;—
For love alone an exile's pain prolong.

Prisoned in consciousness, the soul must dwell
Shut in forever, and its solitude

May none partake; only love to its cell
May softly steal, and call in murmuring tone,
And yearning brood

Till it forgets its prison lone.

Divine is love, a gift so passing great
It challenges the ruthless might of fate:
Yet more than love is that which makes love good,—

The impulse to be worthy, the desire
To rise to heights ideal; to aspire
To some high possible, half understood,
There with hands stainless to lift up,
There with pure lips, cleansed as with fire,
To drink with love the sacramental cup.

Divine is love, yet is that guerdon best
Whose worth ennobles all the rest.

V

NOR yet is knowledge the most royal gem
Man wears in his soul's anadem.

The wisest mage
On mysteries of the ages pouring,
Nature's most secret deeps exploring,
For all his yearning sage
Finds not the secret clue
Which shall interpret Fate's dread page.
Time's vast hour through
The earth flees down the void, nor yet outspeeds
The star-emblazoned riddle which transcends
All human lore; which dulls man's wistful creeds
With doubt which never ends.
All space
Flames with the questions "What?" and "Why?"
While Wisdom veils her face,
And silent in her place
Hath no reply.

VI

YET facing that dread, star-writ scroll,
Man may not wholly yield to fear.
Stronger than doubt, within his soul
One impulse burns with radiance clear:
A quenchless longing for immortal good;
A quick desire for goal yet unattained;
One passion deathless, howsoe'er withstood;

One striving holy, howsoe'er profaned;
One inly urge that pricks man on to grow,
As springs the lotus from Nilotic slime
Through topaz floods toward golden sun to climb
And bloom in chaliced snow.

VII.

TIME wastes like lapsing wave;
And 'now' so soon is 'then';
Like wind-flowers fading on a grave,
The ways, the wars, the woes of men
Begin and end in naught.
Only change may abide;
The famed are the forgotten; man's pride
Breaks like a bubble; man's thought
Blooms, like the rose, only on dust of death.
Yet though all else should fail,
Glory dissolve like breath,
Strength prove of no avail,
Love before sorrow pale;
Though life be base or all disconsolate,
Never is wholly lost that inward fire:
Lives in the heart some flame, some spark innate,
In changing shapes,—now hope and now desire,
Now faith with ecstasy illuminate,
Now courage death to dare;

If bright or dimmed in its degree,
Faint, darkened, wavering though it be,
This of the soul of all things is man's share,—
Boon best beyond compare.

VIII.

FOR proved is manhood's worth
Not by the things of earth,
Not by the laurel to the victor given;
His is the hero-soul,
Though he reach not the goal,
Who hath most nobly in the contest striven.
Though fate to him no wreath assign,
Though swift oblivion will make men forget
The name upon his tombstone set.
One prize pure from all stain
His manhood may attain,—
Still to aspire in discontent divine.

IX.

FOR the spirit of man should be flame,
That must mount, that must leap,—if from shame
Of the pyre of outcast unclean
Supplicating the far blue serene;
Or if storm-torn on sentinel-height
It torch tidings of fear down the night;

Or if watched by pale vestals at prayer
Vows ecstatic it heavenward bear;—
Still starward upspringing in might.
So the spirit of man must aspire
Still to rise, still to soar, still to burn;
Like the tongues Pentecostal in fire
Unceasingly upward to yearn.

X

THIS mighty longing frees man from the thrall
Of time and sense, and makes him lord of all.
This was the germ which stirred primeval dust,
Immortal still, although to ruin fall
The constellations in their march august.
Older this aspiration than hoar time;
Young will it be when time hath been forgot:
When broken is that dream of God sublime
Men call the universe, and earth is not,
This flame unquenchable shall still endure,
Creation's essence pure.
While man is man his heart should be
An altar consecrate on which it glows.
All else may fail; unto eternity
This radiance supreme no wasting knows.
This, Life's best gift, shall make secure
Against all malice of assailing Fate,
Man's selfhood dauntless and inviolate!







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